SKIN PIGMENTATION INFLUENCING PERCEPTION
OF MEXICAN-AMERICANS

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fullfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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Denton, Texas
May, 1981

Subjects were 101 Mexican-American adults (53 females, 48 males), age range 17-72, and most often were in the blue-collar job level. Instructions were that (a) 18 pairs of slides would be shown; (b) each slide would be projected for 15 seconds; (c) each of the two models was to be judged on intelligence, attractiveness, friendliness, happiness, and success; and (d) the rating scale would be marked corresponding to the left or right slide.

Results indicated the lighter-skinned models were judged more favorably than the darker ones on all five dimensions. To the extent this study sheds light on an important cultural value, it is hoped the treatment of Mexican-Americans in therapy will be facilitated and improved.
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SKIN PIGMENTATION INFLUENCING PERCEPTION
OF MEXICAN-AMERICANS

The culture of the Mexican-American has been intimately linked with the value of light skin color. This preference for light skin pigmentation first occurred when Spain was ruled by the dark-skinned Moors (Stoddard, 1973). As a kind of reaction formation against their plight, Spaniards began to value light skin pigmentation. This "White is better" mentality was, then, born in Iberia and later reinforced with Anglo colonization of the Southwest. Stoddard explained, "Even a very critical distinction between the 'pure White' born in Spain (Peninsulars) and their direct offspring born in America (Creoles) proclaimed the latter generations infinitely inferior to the Iberian born elite" (p. 10).

When the Spanish conquered Mexico, they brought with them a "pigmentocracy" that conveniently complemented an old Indian legend. According to this legend, the aged and dying god, Quetzacoatl, promised to return to his people bringing wealth and peace (Stoddard, 1973). This god would return in the form of a White man and would arrive by sea. So when Cortez landed in 1519 in Mexico, he was mistaken for this White savior by the tribute Indians.

As the Spanish colonized Mexico, they intermarried with the conquered Indians. A new "mestizo" or mixed race
emerged that varied in skin pigmentation from dark to light and every shade in between. However, to be dark-skinned was to be associated with a conquered people, and so removing Indian or Negro blood from one's lineage for a price was very much in vogue. Money could be donated to the Church, or any wealth-producing service for the Crown could also be given. So to be light-colored was to be associated with the politically dominant Spanish culture while to be dark-colored was to be associated with a powerless minority.

Therefore, by the time Anglos immigrated into Northern Mexico (now the state of Texas), this caste system based on skin pigmentation had been deeply ingrained into the culture. As Stoddard (1973) noted, "Among the residents of New Mexico the name Spanish-American is not only a term denoting 'genetic purity' but also a claim of pure lineal descent from early Spanish nobility" (p. 11). Later colonization of the Southwest by Anglo-Americans only further reinforced this belief system.

It is no wonder then that Mexican-Americans are found to be consistent in skin color preference. The "White is right" mentality has deep historical roots that is not quickly erased. It has been this author's experience to have Mexican-Americans comment on their darkness and then try to compensate for it by listing positive attributes. For example, statements such as "Mary is dark but she's a hard worker" or "Paul is very dark, but he is a good
provider for his family" are often made. Somehow there is a need to compensate for this uncontrollable characteristic with something that is subject to the individual's control.

Most people have socially interacted with members of their own culture from the day they were born. According to Wylie (1967), social interactions have determined an individual's self-concept. To the extent that one's social interactions have also been cultural ones, then culture could be said to be an important influence on self-concept. Unfortunately there has been little research in this area.

The research that has existed has been contradictory in its conclusions. Part of the problem was that the studies varied in methodology, in ethnic composition of subjects, and in the definition of self-concept. None have directly studied the Mexican-American value placed on light skin pigmentation.

This review of the literature was based upon two broad opposing conclusions. The first was that Anglo-Americans have had better self-concepts than those of Mexican-Americans. The second conclusion was that Mexican-Americans have had better self-concepts than those of Anglo-Americans. All the studies reviewed may be seen as comparing the self-concept of a power-maintaining culture as opposed to that of a power-achieving culture.

Several studies (Gillman, 1970; Gustafson & Owens, 1971; Healey, 1969; Hishiki, 1969; Larkin, 1972; McDaniel,
1967; Munro & Oles, 1975) revealed that Anglo-Americans had more positive self-concepts than Mexican-Americans. The terms positive self-concept and negative self-concept have been used throughout this review instead of high self-concept and low self-concept since self-concept judgments are qualitative and not quantitative.

Healey (1969) found that Negro and Spanish-American groups were considerably more defensive than the Anglo group. To the extent that defensiveness is a protective facade for an insecure individual, it is also a correlate to a negative self-concept. However, defensiveness can also be viewed as a positive attribute in that the individual is protecting something he regards as precious. In such a case, it is a correlate to a positive self-concept. This conclusion, then, is uninterpretable.

Gustafson and Owens (1971) found a trend of differences in self-concept to be cumulative with age, i.e., there were no significant differences between Mexican-American, Anglo and non-Mexican-American self-concepts at the third grade level, but significant differences at the sixth grade. Both Anglo and non-Mexican-American sixth graders scored better on the Self-Esteem Inventory than did their Mexican-American counterparts. Mexican-Americans also scored lower on such academic performance measures as the California Test of Basic Skills, California Test of Mental Maturity, and
Lorge-Thorndike. It was impossible to infer causality one way or the other from this study as it was correlational in design.

Still another study including Mexican-Americans was that of Larkin (1972). Subjects were 1,750 fourth, fifth, and sixth graders in California public schools. Mexican-Americans were found to have the lowest self-esteem with Anglos, Blacks and Orientals in ascending order. Results were significant at the .01 level of significance. The author attributed the Mexican-American low self-esteem to the language problem he or she faced. It has been argued that Orientals also have had an initial language problem and yet they scored highest on self-esteem measures. However, the Mexican-American, unlike the Oriental, has been constantly influenced by the immigration of Mexicans into the United States. Many Mexican-Americans have lived along the border states and their physical proximity to Mexico has influenced this culture greatly.

The fourth study combining Anglo, Black and Mexican-American subjects is that of Munro and Oles (1975). These researchers found Anglos had the most positive self-concepts as measured by ideal self scores. They were followed by Mexican-Americans, and then Blacks ($p < .01$). Self-concept has to do with how an individual views himself (cognitive percept) while self-esteem has to do with the regard an individual has for himself (affective quality).
McDaniel (1967) found that the Anglo mean self-concept score of 127.62 differed significantly ($p < .05$) from the Mexican-American mean self-concept score of 116.04. Again the Anglo-Americans had more positive self-concepts than did the Mexican-Americans.

All the studies just reviewed found Anglos held more positive self-concepts than Mexican-Americans. Both Hishiki (1968) and Gillman (1970) compared Mexican-American self-concept scores with those of the White Georgia sixth-graders studied by Bledsoe and Garrison (1962). Hishiki found the mean self-concept scores for the Georgia girls were greater than those of the sixth grade Mexican-American girls. She also found self-concept and academic achievement were positively correlated for the Mexican-American girls. Gillman (1970) concluded that Mexican-Americans in her New Mexico study had lower self-concept scores, lower mean grade placements, and lower IQs than the disadvantaged White girls in the Georgia study. Part of the problem in interpreting these results was that there were confounding variables. The two groups differed not only in ethnicity but in geographical residence and in date of testing. One cannot be sure if these other variables were actually responsible for the obtained results instead of ethnicity.

Therefore, only three of the seven studies just reviewed (Larkin, 1972; McDaniel, 1967; Munro & Oles, 1975) yielded results that could largely be attributed to the
independent variable of ethnicity. All concluded that Anglo-Americans thought and felt better about themselves than did Mexican-Americans. McDaniel is the only one to use the term "self-concept." Each study seemed to measure a different aspect of the self-concept.

Other studies have also included Mexican-Americans as subjects (Cooper, 1971; Healey, 1969; Healey & DeBlassie, 1974). They differ from the previously mentioned studies in that they reach the opposite conclusion i.e., that Mexican-Americans have achieved more positive self-concepts or self-perceptions than Anglo-Americans have. Although they all concluded that Mexican-American self-concept was more positive than that of Anglo-Americans, they disagreed as to how Mexican-Americans rated themselves as compared to other minority cultures. For example, in Healey's (1969) study, Mexican-Americans rated higher in total score, physical self-concept, and moral-ethical self-concept than did Anglos. Anglos scored higher than Blacks on the total self-concept score. Yet Healey and DeBlassie (1974) found Blacks scored higher than Anglos on the total positive score, with Mexican-Americans scoring the highest. Mexican-Americans also scored highest on the Self-Satisfaction Scale as well as on the Moral-Ethical Self Scale of the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS). A different result was found by Cooper (1971), who collected data on 11 sets of bipolar adjectives given to Mexican-Americans, Blacks, Anglos, and
Indians. He concluded that each ethnic group viewed itself
in a more favorable light than it did any other group.

Carter (1968) dealt with Anglo and Mexican-American
ninth-graders. No significant difference was found on a
5-point semantic differential test given to 190 Mexican-
Americans and 98 Anglos. The only difference found was on
the "good-bad" word pair in which 21% of the Mexican-
Americans scored at the "extreme good" end of the scale, but
only 13% of the Anglos scored at this same point on the
scale. Carter, therefore, concluded that the Mexican-
Americans self-concept was just as good if not better than
that of Anglos. It must be noted, however, that several
important details of this study were omitted so as to render
the results inconclusive, or dubious at best. The method-
ology used as well as the hypotheses tested, were not
clearly presented.

It seems, then, that the results one obtained on self-
concept studies depended largely on the methodology used.
Wylie (1967) stated there was a need for more systematic,
analytical designs and complained that the research attempted
to do too much and the theoretical constructs were too
broad. Perhaps another reason for these inconclusive results
was the fact that an important factor of Mexican-American
self-concept had not been taken into account. That factor
was the effect skin pigmentation has had on the Mexican-
American's self-concept.
For quite some time, it has been known that Blacks placed great value on skin pigmentation, with lighter-colored skin being viewed as better than dark-colored skin. Healey (1969) noted that "to be most loved as a Negro child, the child has to appear least Negro, with Negro parents favoring the lighter children" (p. 23). Hands (1974) stated it was the acceptance of White racial prejudice that was responsible for measuring one's personal worth by the degrees of proximity to White complexion. She further stated that in Negro families, the dark child is treated as an "ugly duckling." With regard to the "self-fulfilling prophecy," Munro and Oles found their darker-colored children had lower grade averages, levels of aspiration, and socio-economic levels than did their lighter-skinned children.

Several investigators concerned themselves mainly with skin pigmentation. They attempted to ascertain the degree to which an ethnic group would identify itself according to its skin pigmentation. In actuality they were measuring the extent to which minority cultures believed light skin was better than dark skin. The first study done in this area was that of Clark and Clark (1940), who showed Black children both White and Black dolls to see which they preferred. Surprisingly enough, the Black children consistently preferred the White doll. It was reasoned that from a very early age, Black children were aware of their low status as members of a minority group. In order to
compensate for their feelings of inferiority, they "identified with the aggressor" and viewed themselves as White instead of Black.

Historically, Blacks can be viewed as having had this identification problem since their contact with White slave traders over 200 years ago. The identification problem of Mexican-Americans, however, extends back over five centuries.

The studies on skin pigmentation as it relates to the Mexican-American have yielded more consistent findings than those of Blacks. Werner and Evans (1968) found Mexican-Americans preferred White dolls and identified with them. Another finding was that the boys in this study viewed the white doll as bigger than the Black doll. A replication study by Durett and Davy (1970) found the same results with 80% of the Mexican-Americans identifying with the Anglo doll. Badaines (1973) found Mexican-Americans could accurately identify Blacks, Anglos, and Mexican-Americans from photographs, yet did not prefer their own group.

Two other studies yielded somewhat different results. Rohrer (1973) found a correlation between sex and skin color preference in Mexican-Americans. She stated that although both Blacks and Mexican-Americans preferred Mexican-Americans over Whites, the Mexican-American boys preferred Whites, while the girls preferred their own ethnic group. Rice, Ruiz and Padilla (1974), on the other hand, found age difference was responsible for contradictory results. In
their study, 140 preschoolers and third-graders matched descriptive phrases to pictures of Black, Anglo, and Mexican-American models. The preschoolers could not distinguish between Anglos and Chicanos while the third graders could. Third graders also preferred their own Mexican-American group more than they did any other, but only on the four descriptive phrases dealing with social preference. An example of such a phrase was "the one you would like for a big brother."

In general, then, Mexican-American children could be said to prefer lighter skin to darker skin. The Rohrer study was the only one that found that Mexican-Americans preferred their own ethnic group.

Interestingly enough, the literature on skin pigmentation and Mexican-American self-concept has dealt only with children. Sometimes adolescents were studied, but not one of the studies included adults over age 18. Since most clinical settings deal more with Mexican-American adults than they do with children, it seems that research on this age group would provide much needed information. A study with adults could clarify the inconsistent findings in the literature as it is suspected that older individuals are more tenacious in their belief systems than are younger ones.

The present study proposed to ascertain to what extent Mexican-American adults value light skin pigmentation over dark pigmentation. The hypothesis was that, given a series
of photographs of Mexican-Americans, the lighter individuals would be perceived more favorably than the darker-colored ones.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 101 Mexican-American adults (53 females, 48 males) from a large Catholic church in Fort Worth, Texas. The volunteers were literate in Spanish and English. As summarized in Table 1 (see Appendix A), age range was 17-72 with a mean of 39 and a median of 35. These subjects most often were in the blue-collar job level. Although this finding appears unusually low for a random sample, it appropriately reflects the economic levels of Mexican-Americans in the population for the present study. The mean educational level achieved was from 10 to 12 years, without a high school diploma. The mean number of years lived in the United States was 30.26, and the median was 25.27 years.

Instruments and Materials

An AF2 Kodak slide projector was used to show a series of 18 slides (35 mm) which actually consisted of only 6 individuals (3 men and 3 women). Each picture was appropriately lightened or darkened by means of a photographic chemical process so that each of the six individuals had light, medium, and dark versions of their facial features. All slides were primarily of the face. The men were
dressed in a blue sportcoat, and the women wore a ladies green jacket.

The forced-choice rating scales (see Appendix B) listed five attributes (intelligence, attractiveness, friendliness, happiness, and success) to be assessed for one of each pair of models.

Procedure

The volunteer subjects were randomly selected and scheduled at their convenience in groups of 20-30 for participation. They were asked to sign the informed consent form (see Appendix C) and then requested to complete the biographical questionnaire (see Appendix D) which was written in English and Spanish in order to collect pertinent and meaningful objective data of the subjects. They were told the study was about measuring romantic attractiveness. It was stressed that their first reactions were the most important, so they should not dwell too long on any one item when completing the rating scales.

Instructions in English and Spanish (see Appendix E) were verbally given that (a) 18 pairs of slides would be shown; (b) each slide would be projected for 15 seconds (during which time each subject was to look at the slide); (c) decide which of the two models was more intelligent, more attractive, etc.; and (d) mark the rating scale with a check mark corresponding to the left or right slide to
record his/her judgment. After all slides were shown and the rating scales completed and collected, the subjects were thanked for their participation and told how to contact the experimenter if anyone wished to obtain individual results.

Results

Data were analyzed by means of chi-square and contingency coefficient. As shown in Table 2 (see Appendix F), the lighter of the two models presented was judged more favorably than the darker one on all five dimensions (intelligence, attractiveness, friendliness, happiness, and success). Both intelligence and success had the same contingency coefficient (.34), the same level of significance (p < .01), and essentially the same chi-square ($X^2 = 230.6$ for intelligence, $X^2 = 232.2$ for success). The next highest was happiness ($C = .28$), followed by attractiveness ($C = .26$), and then friendliness ($C = .25$).

Although all these results were very reliable statistically, the amount of association was modest. There was little if any relationship found between the subjects' biographic variables (age, sex, economic level, education, and number of years lived in the United States) and ratings of the models' pigmentation. No nontrivial relationships were found.
Discussion

The hypothesis is confirmed, though modestly, that Mexican-American adults tend to judge a model as more intelligent, attractive, friendly, happy, and successful based upon that model's lighter skin pigmentation when compared to a darker one presented simultaneously.

Both the intelligence and success variables had the same contingency coefficient, level of significance, and chi-square. This fact suggests that these two dimensions are so closely associated as to be considered as a single dimension when measured, and may be viewed as an overall competency dimension by the Mexican-American peer judges. The combination of intelligence and success into a dimension of competency received the highest level of association of all the others in terms of judgments about and by Mexican-Americans.

The results seem to imply a great deal about Mexican-American self-concept. If the intelligence and success dimensions are collapsed into one of competency, the implications regarding self-concept are significant. How competent one judges himself will obviously effect how well one thinks of himself. It will affect how much an individual will persist in the face of conflict, what kinds of attributions are made regarding success and failure, and to what extent the person will believe in himself.
The results reveal that part of the Mexican-American self-concept is associated with a characteristic that the individual has no control over—skin pigmentation. Those fortunate enough to be born light complexioned will be judged to be more intelligent, attractive, friendly, happy, and successful than those who are not. A self-fulfilling prophecy is then manifested in the culture so that light-skinned individuals will succeed to a greater extent than dark-skinned ones, simply because the light-skinned persons will believe in their capabilities and work to develop them, while dark-skinned individuals will never give themselves a chance.

For therapists who work with Mexican-Americans, these findings shed light on poor therapy outcomes. Mexican-American clients who perceive themselves to be dark, or the darker members of their families, often come into therapy with biased cognitions about themselves based upon their low self-concepts. Failure to persist in therapy or to follow through in effecting change is often due to low self-concept based upon this uncontrollable characteristic. Doubtless there are other causes or reasons why Mexican-Americans do not always succeed in therapy. However, the importance of skin pigmentation to this culture is often not dealt with in therapy because the therapist is unaware of this perception. To the extent that this study sheds light on
an important cultural value, it is hoped the treatment of Mexican-Americans in therapy will be facilitated and improved.

Although the associations were found to be modest in this study (contingency coefficient = .25 - .34), there is good reason to believe that the actual association is stronger than that detected here. A further refinement in the methodology could result in stronger associations in the predicted direction.

Such an improvement would be the varying of the skin pigmentation of the models while keeping the background of the slide at a constant shade. In this study, the entire slide was lightened or darkened by a photographic process. Subjects then, could have taken this shading into account when judging the two models so that a darkened model would be perceived as lighter because he or she had to be darkened so much more than the "darker" model. Relative lightness and darkness could actually be responsible for the judgments made in this experiment. By controlling for the shading of the background, judgments of favorability would more accurately reflect variations in the skin pigmentation of models. The "true coloring" of the model would by the same token, be less obvious to the subjects.
Appendix A

Table 1
Biographical Characteristics of Subjects

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\[ n = 101. \]

*bCoded according to Hollingshead SES Scale in which each category within a variable was coded numerically. The job variable was coded from laborer-one to professional-five. Educational level was coded from one to eight.*
Appendix B

Rating Scale
Escala de evaluaciones

Sample
Ejemplo

more intelligent
____ más inteligente ____

gooder, more handsome
____ más hermosa, más simpático ____

gentler
____ más amistosa, más amistoso ____

friendlier
____ más amistosa, más amistoso ____
happier
____ más feliz ____

more successful
____ más afortunada, más afortunado ____

1. more intelligent
____ más inteligente ____

gooder, more handsome
____ más hermosa, más simpático ____

gentler
____ más amistosa, más amistoso ____

friendlier
____ más amistosa, más amistoso ____
happier
____ más feliz ____

more successful
____ más afortunada, más afortunado ____

2. more intelligent
____ más inteligente ____

(Actual form continued numbering through 18 for the five attributes.)
Appendix C

INFORMED CONSENT

NAME OF SUBJECT

1. I hereby give consent to Patsy Alvarez Diaz to perform or conduct the following investigational procedure: a slide presentation of eighteen pairs of six Mexican-American models.

2. I have (seen, heard) a clear explanation and understand the nature and purpose of the procedure or treatment; possible appropriate alternative procedures that would be advantageous to me; and the attendant discomforts or risks involved and the possibility of complications which might arise. I have (seen, heard) a clear explanation and understand the benefits to be expected. I understand that the procedure to be performed is investigational and that I may withdraw my consent for my status. With my understanding of this, having received this information and satisfactory answers to the questions I have asked, I voluntarily consent to the procedure designated in the above paragraph.

(Date) (Fecha)

(Signature) (Firma)

(Witness) (Testigo)
Appendix D

Biographical Questionnaire

Personal Information
Información Personal

1. __________ (Numbered in sequence for anonymity.)

2. Age, edad __________

3. Sex, sexo __________

4. Occupation, trabajo __________

5. Education, educación
   a. 1-6 years, 1-6 años
   b. 7-9 years, 7-9 años
   c. 10-12 years, 10-12 años
   d. GED
   e. high school diploma, diploma de la secundaria
   f. some college, algunos años de colegio
   g. college degree, algún título del colegio
   h. graduate school degree, título de la escuela de graduantes

6. How many years have you lived in the United States? ¿Qué tantos años ha vivido en los Estados Unidos?

__________________________
Appendix E

Instructions

This study is about the first impressions formed regarding romantic attractiveness. You will be shown a pair of slides eighteen times during which you are to decide which of the two individuals is more intelligent, attractive, friendly, happy and successful. Mark the corresponding side of the rating scale with a check mark as you decide. Remember this study deals with first impressions, so do not spend too long on any one attribute. Be sure, however, not to skip any. I will call out the number of the pair as the machine changes the slides, so be sure you are working on the correct one. The numbers are ordered on the front and back pages so do not lose your place. It is very important that you fill out this form in the order in which they are presented. Let us work on the sample now. (Subjects were then permitted to ask questions about the research process.)

Please sign the informed consent form at this time. This form gives me permission to conduct the experiment with you as one of the subjects. It states I have given you a clear explanation of the nature and purpose of the procedure. (The forms were picked up at this time.)
After you finish, fill out the personal information sheet. You will notice a number in red at the top of the page. In order to insure confidentiality, you have been assigned a number instead of requiring your signature. If you wish to know the results of your form, remember or write down this number and contact me at the following: (Subjects were then given the phone number where the experimenter could be reached.) Fill out the form now and put your pens down when you are finished. (After all the forms were filled and questions answered, the experiment was conducted.)
## Table 2

Chi-square Analysis for Lighter Skin Pigmentation Rated More Favorably by Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Chi-square</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Contingency Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>230.6</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractiveness</td>
<td>136.8</td>
<td>.0001</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendliness</td>
<td>125.5</td>
<td>.0001</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>153.2</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>232.2</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( n = 101 \)
Reference


Clark, K. B., & Clark, M. P. Skin color as a factor in racial identification of Negro preschool children. *Journal of Social Psychology, 1940, 11, 159-169.*


